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The John Muir Center for Regional Studies

The JOHN MUIR NEWSLETTER

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WRITING OR LIVING? JOHN MUIR'S WRITERLY IDENTITY AND AMBIVALENCE

BY RANDALL ROORDA, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI, KANSAS CITY

(Editor's note: As many fans of John Muir realize, Muir was not comfortable with writing for publication. This analysis of that issue is a revision of a paper presented earlier to the Western Literature Association. We wish to thank the State University of New York Press for permission to print this excerpt from the forthcoming book, Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing, *by Randall Roorda.)*

The aspect of John Muir's life I offer is that of a person who wrote voluminously for apparently private purposes yet disrespected and abhorred writing for public ones, even though increasingly he seemed marked for that work. It seems clear that Muir struggled against assuming the identity of a writer, and appeared to accept most any pretense to avoid "writing" in the later sense. Even his compiling of a fortune in agriculture can be interpreted, argues author Stephen Fox, as an excuse to evade the making of books.[1] Yet for private purposes he required no pretense or even much of a procedure to wield his pen. *That* writing, by all accounts, was integral to his way of being in a place, part and parcel of the "living" he made. If, as Robert Engberg and Donald Wesling maintain, "Muir's story continues to fascinate us" because there is something "profoundly representative" about it,[2] this devotion to "living" and ambivalence toward print may be part of what makes it so.

Since I am concerned with Muir as a writer who is widely read, I will begin with the question of to what degree we should attribute to him the identity of a "writer." Those who write the introductions to books have a particular need to establish such identity. Yet both Edward Hoagland and Gretel Ehrlich, in introducing reprints of works of Muir, have seen fit to disclaim or qualify Muir's writerly identity. Hoagland especially wants to excuse Muir for not being a more proficient or versatile literary artist than he was. His essay opens with this disclaimer:

"We must go halfway with John Muir. He was more of an explorer than a writer, more confident of his abilities in botany and geology than of what he could do with the eagle-quill pens he liked to use, while encouraging a friend's year-old baby to scramble about the floor, lending liveliness to the tedium of a writer's room."[3]

To "go halfway" suggests to give the benefit of doubts to a not-quite-writer whose lack of confidence redeems his lack of competence.

What business do we have reading this half-competent writer, then? He has other abilities, clearly, but more than that, he has an eagle-quill pen and a baby on the floor – natural talismans and new life as counterweights to the tacit artificiality and death of the study. This opposition of "liveliness" to "tedium" is one version of a tacit split between "living" and "writing" in general, one that Stephen Trimble makes much of in his introductory essay to *Words From the Land*, and overview of the work habits and attitudes of nature writers at large. Remarking on what he sees as the dual activity of nature writers, Trimble remarks: "They write. They live. And they forge a voice by doing both."[4] This construction of "writing" as separate and distinct from "living" is echoed frequently in the comments of nature writers on their trade. Hoagland suggests its force for the nature writer Muir; even in writing, Hoagland implies, Muir veers toward living, leaving us readers "halfway" away.

Hoagland further evokes Muir's non-writerliness by conducting a running comparison with a kindred figure who *was* a writer: "Henry David Thoreau lived to write, but Muir lived to hike."[5] Yet since Thoreau hiked constantly and Muir compiled heaps of on-site writings, in what does the distinction reside? More than anything, it must concern the resolve to publish and disseminate one's writing, and to be socially defined thereby. In this regard, what each man "lived to do" gets less clear-cut and more bound to shifting life trajectories, with the resolve to publish initially strong, then blunted and turned under in Thoreau, and absent at first in Muir but developing under encouragement and pressure from friends and eased by the remarkable reception his efforts enjoyed from the start. Yet even his success, his immediate acceptance by the best Eastern monthlies, serves mainly to confirm Muir's status as anomalous, for as Fox comments: "Most young writers believe in themselves

(continued on page 3)

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The editor and staff of the John Muir Newsletter owe an apology to our readers. Because of one too few reviews of copy before the printing of the Fall, 1997, Newsletter, a gremlin in the computer was not rooted out. We apologize to our readers for the fact that some annoucements of forthcoming events had already appeared in previous issues. We thank you for your indulgence and we will make every effort to prevent such duplication in future.*

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Newsletter readers will be interested to learn of the Spring, 1998, program of field trips sponsored by the Sierra Institute of the University of California Extension Division at Santa Cruz. "The Mountains of California" will be the subject of an April 2-May 17 course which earns 15 units. Components of the course include ecosystems, introduction to Sierra Nevada natural history, and introduction to wilderness education. An April 7-June 1 course, also earning 15 units, is on Nature and Culture with components on cultural ecology, perspectives on nature and introduction to wilderness education. Two other courses running from April 2-May 27, for 15 units, are desert field studies and nature philosophy and religion. These are open to the public, and participants are required to supply their own backpacks and equipment. For full information and fee schedules, contact (408) 427-6618.

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The John Muir Center is delighted to announce the date of publication of its next volume focusing on the work of John Muir. The book, based on revised papers presented to the California History Institute in spring, 1996, is entitled *John Muir in Historical Perspective.* It will be published by the respected publishing firm of Peter Lang, with date of publication expected to be by the middle of 1998. This volume of over a dozen essays by well-known Muir scholars such as Frank Buske, Terry Gifford, Michael Hall, Michael Branch and others will be priced at $29.95 retail. The Muir Center hopes to be able to offer discounted copies to the subscribers of this newsletter. Please watch this space for announcements of exact date of publication and other details.

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As readers may be aware through other sources, the California Sesquicentennial is about to be celebrated through various activities throughout the state over the next two years. A kick-off event was the California Studies Conference held on February 5-7, 1998, at the University of Southern California. The conference was called, "California 1848-1998: 150 Years Since the Discovery of Gold and the U.S. Mexican War." This was a rich and very significant event for Californians. Among the sponsors were the California Council for the Humanities and the Southern California Studies Center of USC as well as the California Studies Association. One session of great interest to our readers was on the new California environmentalism after 500 years of resource use. To obtain full information on the conference, phone (800) 872-1104.

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Two events sponsored by the California Historical Society may be of interest to our readers. The first, on January 23, 24, and 25, 1998, was a train trip from Oakland to Sacramento to the California State Historical Museum. A $55 ticket included an Amtrak round-trip ticket, bus fare, and museum admission and a walking tour. For those joining the tour in Sacramento, the price was $35. For full information and to learn of future such plans, please contact the California Historical Society, 678 Mission St., San Francisco, CA 94105. On June 6, the CHS is sponsoring a sailing afternoon, including lunch, on the *Californian,* a replica of an 1848 sailing ship. The trip will include lecture on maritime history and details on maritime technology. The ship will leave from South Beach Harbor, Pier 40, just south of China Beach. Cost is $95, or $85 for members.

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A couple of interesting reports on environmental issues are available from the Center for California Studies at Sacramento State. "Federal and State Parallelism In Environmental Regulation" may be ordered for $7.00. A report entitled, "Legislative History of the Environmental Goals and Strategies," is available, also for $7.00. These and other reports may be ordered from the Center for California Studies, California State University, Sacramento, 6000 J Street, Sacramento, CA 95819-6081, or phone (916) 278-6906.

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In spring, the California American Studies Association will sponsor an interesting conference out of state. Jointly with the Rocky Mountain American Studies Association, it will co-host a conference in Albuquerque on April 24-26, 1998. The conference is called "Corridors and Open Spaces: Place, Time and Texts," and will explore "Americaness" of the Southwest and along the Pacific Coast. Sessions will deal with topics such as technological and ecological corridors and spaces, native, mestizo and immigrant communities, and other cultural and environmental subjects. For information, write A. Gabriel Meienda, American Studies Dept., University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, or e-mail address: gabriel@unm.edu

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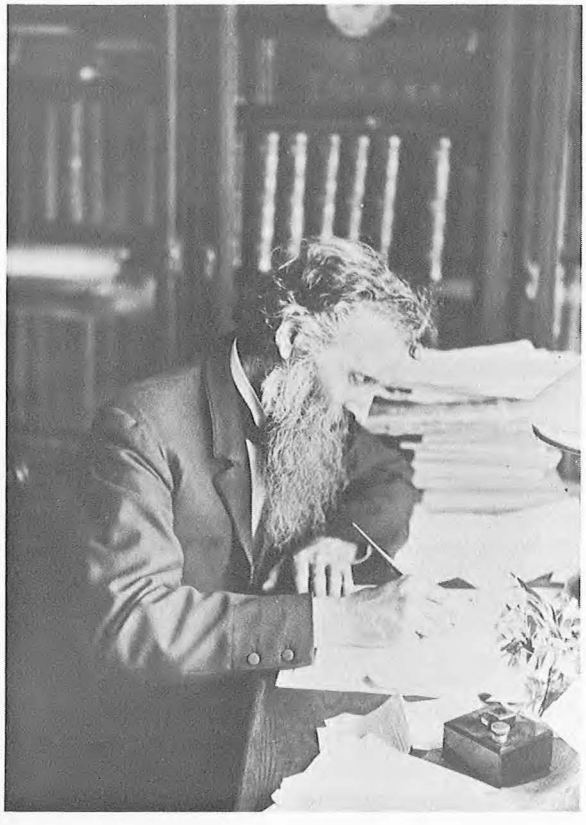
extravagantly in order to endure early rejections; Muir deprecated himself but was an immediate success."[6] *Real* writers don't make it this way.

This sense of being *other* than a writer is central to the appeal Muir exerts *as* a writer. In every sense anyone could discern, Muir was a natural. It is conventional to note that apparent effortlessness in writing may result from arduous effort – and Muir did work hard at making books – but it is less remarked that an effortless quality may issue, too, from the absence of effort. Or at any rate, from its irrelevance, as seems often to have been the case with Muir. Consider his writing habits in the field: Linnie Marsh Wolfe states that he carried "two or more notebooks" on treks, "tied to his belt whichever one he happened to pick up," and "wrote his notes, sometimes in the front, sometimes in the back, often not dating the entries."[7] Consider the volume and character of his output: sixty journals in forty-four years, plus "a mass of notes scribbled upon loose sheets and bits of paper of all shapes and sizes."[8] Despite this habitual and prodigious output, no one supposes, as some do with Thoreau, that these journals may be Muir's primary work after all, outstripping his published works. The reason is that Muir's reluctance to assume the identity of a writer is manifest even in his disorderly, random, chronologically neglectful – that is, the effortless – manner of his journalizing. There is no suspense or complexity to the question of whether he hoped or presumed these writings would be read: he appears to have been oblivious to the prospect. Of Thoreau, Sharon Cameron claims that the wooden box he built to house his journals evinces his "cogent wishes for literary posterity"[9]; Muir's journals and notes end up in piles which he likens to "moraines on my den floor."[10] They are not boxed; like gravel, they are deposited.



John Muir writing, copyright 1984, Muir-Hanna Trust

Given his evidently effortless and unselfconscious facility with language and the immediate success this bred, what are we to make of Muir's distaste for writing? It's certainly true that books and their making were to Muir suspect and inadequate in the extreme. In a letter he complains of an "infinite shortcoming" with writing, "the dead bony words" which "rattle in one's teeth" when read.[11] But as Wolfe suggests, *spoken* words were not similarly lifeless for Muir, and the effortless quality of his writing must have been related to his knack for extemporaneous spoken address – an arguably more natural facility and one to which Muir certainly attached greater value. And while Muir's success stemmed largely from the support and exhortation of friends, the latter, in turn, issued largely from Muir's powers of speech. His friends urged him to the solitary labor of writing for publication because, as Fox notes, they were so awed by "the nature-struck verbiage that cascaded from his mouth" in company, a torrent which they believed ought to "be preserved in print."[12] Thus while several commentators reasonably attribute Muir's distaste for writing to the fact that it would detract from his time spent outdoors, it just as surely took away from the time he spent holding forth in the parlor.

Fox describes how Muir would monopolize conversation at social gatherings for as much as eight hours at a stretch – and how chagrined he would be if it were pointed out to him that he had done so. Whatever else might be said of it, I would observe that in this behavior – spontaneous, "unconscious," extended in duration, situated in intimate yet public gatherings – Muir resembles nothing so much as *rhapsode* in the traditional, oral sense. The implications of this shed light on a seeming contradiction in this depiction, by Gretel Ehrlich, of Muir the writer in old age:

> Even at age seventy-three he struggled with the translation of experience into language. He preferred to talk, enchanting listeners with stories of his adventures until his wife, Louie, or a friend shunted him upstairs into the grim solitude of his writing room.[13]

Here "language" appears differentiated from and even opposed to "talk," associated exclusively with writing. Yet this understanding of "language" as essentially writing is its historical sense as well, since Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders note, "language," strictly speaking, is a nonentity in cultures without writing: "Only the alphabet has the power to create 'language' and 'words,' for the word does not emerge until it is written down."[14] To the bardic rhapsode of nonliterate societies, even memorization is foreign, modelled as it is upon the tangible, persistent traces of written "language." In his verbal fecundity and his disregard for the preservation of his emissions, Muir resembles that bard; and while he strives to fulfill the wishes of others for preservation, there remains always something grudging and equivocal in his acquiescence.

Thus Muir enters his "grim solitude" upon the urging, even the injunction, of a community – one that values his spontaneous vatic emissions but needs them preserved in print. In this

situation, "writing" is a lonely, laborious undertaking precisely because it answers to *social* circumstances: it is spouse and sponsors that "shunt" Muir to his study and lend him a baby to enliven it. But then what of that solitude that is *not* grim, that writing in the wilderness which is not the "writing" of the room? Even this writing extends from an identifiable social milieu, in the sense that Muir's journal-making habit stemmed from a habit of correspondence – in particular an "exchange of thought" in letters proposed by Jeanne C. Carr, his confidante and the wife of a professor of Muir's – and pursued voluminously for many years.[15] I cannot broach here the many dimensions of Muir's complex relationship with Mrs. Carr; I would note only that it was in correspondence with Carr that Muir developed not only the prose manner but also the habit of spontaneous writing that marked the journals he soon began to keep – and that of those who urged Muir to take up a public pen, it was Carr who urged longest and loudest, and indeed was primarily responsible for Muir's acquaintance with the many others who echoed her exhortations.

We notice by now certain complications in the picture of a Muir split between the joy of "living" and the toil of "writing." There are gradations between the most private and most public forms of his writing, with Jeanne Carr a mediating figure between these extremes. Muir's journals, his most unstudied writing, instigated upon Mrs. Carr's suggestions, may be thought of as his form of "talk" in solitude, a sort of solo gregariousness. The more extended entries share manner and substance with Muir's letters to Carr. And many of Muir's early articles, in turn, originated in epistolary reports to Carr, dispatched upon his correspondent's urging and revised upon her suggestions.

These various sites and levels of inscription exemplify how a thread of textuality shuttles loom-like through Muir's travels between wilderness solitude and human households. This thread is oral and rhapsodic at its source – the root of "rhapsode" being to stitch together.[16] What Muir increasingly stitches together is an identity bearing an ethical purpose which is at once self-effacing and self-assured. His central expression of this purpose, often quoted as a single clause – "I care to live only to entice people to look at Nature's loveliness" – itself comes not from any public pronouncement but from a letter to Jeanne Carr. The entire paragraph from which it is taken is worth examining. Muir has just mentioned his latest solitary excursion, during which he has gathered "ouzel tales to tell," and has relayed his renewed conviction that he is "hopelessly and forever a mountaineer." He continues:

"How glorious my studies seem, and how simple. I found a noble truth concerning the Merced moraines that escaped me hitherto. Civilization and fever and all the morbidness that has been hooted at me has not dimmed my glacial eye, and I care to live only to entice people to look at Nature's loveliness. My own special self is nothing. My feet have recovered their cunning. I feel myself again."[17]

Here Muir's much-vaunted mission to "entice" can be seen as the outgrowth of his "studies," which involved the recovery of "noble truths" in nature not possible in "civilization." By this sequence of associations, the solitary retreat from civilization's oppressive, even persecutory force acquires ethical purpose. The stance is ascetic, solitude being productive of a true (unfevered) view of one's "special self" and leading to its renunciation through ethical commitment. But note that this declaration of self-abnegation occurs in a passage the thrust of which is a celebration of the writer's own rejuvenation, prowess and success. While the "special self" may be "nothing," there is another, authentic identity that is not the product of fever and morbidness, not tethered to personality: this identity Muir does not renounce but exultantly recovers in his "studies." It is not an exclusively mental entity, not a mind steering a body: it incorporates a glacial eye, feet of cunning, a self he can feel and need not merely reflect upon. It is not written.

Finally, note that Muir's declaration extends from a refreshed resolve over his vocation, his social role; and the role he declares is not that of writer but of "mountaineer," one with "ouzel tales to tell." Further, his resolution to "live to entice" others comes on the eve of four further years of solitary wilderness travel extending well beyond the orbit of Yosemite; the paragraph that follows announces his plans. How can Muir assert a mission to entice others even as he is planning to disappear even further from their midst? Only through his writing, we might say, but even more, through the nonhuman "tales to tell" he gathers, the "noble truths" turned up in the cunning movement of his feet. The social function of Muir's "mountaineer" is more nearly akin to that of the storyteller, as critic Walter Benjamin describes it, than the writer as popularly figured.

Whether it's one who's "stayed at home" or, like the mountaineer, "come from afar," the storyteller, according to Benjamin, is one "who has counsel for his readers," with counsel meaning "less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding."[18] Counsel cannot be sought or used by those who do not recognize the story, though; thus the threat to storytelling, which Benjamin regards as a dying art, stems from the diminished value and communicability of direct experience in the industrial era. For storytelling relies upon oral tradition and transmission; its opposite number, the novel, depends upon the printed book and extends from the status of the writer as a solitary individual, who in isolation can neither give nor receive counsel.

I am suggesting not that Muir is a storyteller in any such pure and unequivocal sense but rather that the role of the storyteller *as opposed to* that of the "maker of books" is one that figures in the formation of his occupational identity. It does so in several of the characteristics that Benjamin attributes to it. For one, Muir continually espouses the virtues of direct experience – especially of nature, but also implicitly of the speech of others. His resistance to writing stems largely from his recurring anxiety over the communicability of his own peculiar yet exemplary experience in the cold medium of print. He bemoans the static, moribund quality of books, and decries the quality of their counsel, so inferior to the counsel of mountains. And of course, he himself was a most spellbinding storyteller in person, his written works by all accounts paling beside his impromptu spoken performances.

But just as Muir's writing behavior complicates notions of writing as solitary *or* social activity, so the opposition of oral storytelling to literate technology is complicated in the figure of this reluctant writer, who was also a mechanical wizard, a clockmaker and inventor, "one of America's first efficiency experts,"[19] before he was ever the sage of primeval nature. Lacking the space to develop this complication, I can only add

it in passing to the structure of tensions and portents to be plotted from Muir's case onto that of nature writing at large. Rather than recapitulate, in concluding I will settle for innuendo. Look again at Muir's statement of purpose – "I care to live only to entice people to look at Nature's loveliness" – and you will find that it reflects a double desire: to write and be read to effect ("to entice") and to effect an end to writing ("to look"). What other literary genre – what poem or novel – embodies anything like the ambivalence here formulated? Gary Nabhan quips that nature writing should "stimulate the reader to put the book down"[20] – surely a perverse intent for one whose occupation is writing. If Muir was moved to "put down" the book in a less favorable sense, his denigration of cold print may extend from his casting about for an occupation, "a living," that is not exclusive of "living." More successful at this than most but less than he would have liked, in this respect, especially, Muir is representative.

Notes

1. Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 73.
2. Ibid., 5.
3. Edward Hoagland, "In Praise of John Muir." *On Nature: Nature, Landscape, and Natural History*. Ed. Daniel Halpern. (San Francisco: North Point, 1986), 45.
4. Stephen Trimble, "Introduction: The Naturalist's Trance." *Words from the Land: Encounters with Natural History Writing*. Ed. by Trimble (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith: 1988), 2.
5. Hoagland, 45.
6. Fox, 56.
7. Linnie Marsh Wolfe, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1979; 1938), xi.
8. Ibid., ix.
9. Sharon Cameron, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 93.
10. Wolfe, xv.
11. Robert Engberg and Donald Wesling, ed. *John Muir: To Yosemite and Beyond* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 143.
12. Fox, 19.
13. Gretel Enrlich, "Introduction," *My First Summer in the Sierra*. By John Muir (New York: Penguin, 1987), xv.
14. Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*. (New York: Vintage-Random, 1989), 7.
15. Fox, 45.
16. Illich and Sanders, 18.
17. Engberg and Wesling, 159.
18. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Shocken, 1969), 86.
19. David Wyatt, *The Fall into Eden: Landscape and Imagination in California* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 43.
20. Edward Lueders, ed. *Writing Natural History: Dialogues with Authors* (Salt Lake City: Univ. of Utah Press, 1989), 74.

Reviews of Recent Books

The Greening of Faith: God, the Environment, and the Good Life

John E. Carroll, Paul Brockelman, and Mary Westfall, editors. Forward by Bill McKibben. Hanover: The University Press of New England, 1997.

reviewed by Dennis Williams
Southern Nazarene University

Ever since Lynne White, Jr., the University of California medievalist, published his provocative 1967 essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," scholars and activists have been engaged in the process of substantiating or refuting White's thesis. White suggested that Christianity laid the foundation for environmental exploitation by providing the philosophical justification for separating humans from the larger environment. Explorations of various religious responses to the environment have emerged consistently over the past thirty years. They ranged from the near classic compilations made by Ian Barbour (*Western Man and Environmental Ethics* [1973]) and David and Eileen Spring (*Ecology and Religion in History* [1974]) to the more recent individual explorations of Susan Power Bratton (*Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife* [1993]) and Robert Fowler (*The Greening of Protestant Thought*, [1995]). Muir scholars have joined this debate in their assessments of Muir. Works such as Michael Cohen's *Pathless Way* and Ron Limbaugh's "The Nature of John Muir's Religion" have dealt with spirituality as an important motivator of environmental action in Muir's life.

In *The Greening of Faith,* authors from a variety of religious and philosophical perspectives argue that the good life sought by Americans can be achieved only by integrating religious faith with environmental responsibility. Each essay in this compilation revolves around the topic of "God, the Environment, and the Good Life." Each claims that developing and subscribing to an environmentally aware faith is the only way to reorient human societies away from destructive patterns to physical, psychological, spiritual, and environmental wholeness. Early in these essays, Paul Brockelman, a distinguished professor of Philosophy at the University of New Hampshire, joined Timothy C. Weiskel and Steven C. Rockefeller in calling for an awakening to the religious consideration of the ecological problem. Brockelman argued the need for a conversion experience to make this reorientation. He constructed a parable of John Muir's industrial accident in the Indianapolis wagon wheel factory, which rendered him temporarily blind, to argue that we need to see the natural world through different eyes, to develop a different worldview.

The point made by most authors is that until we see the natural world with a sense of wonder, until we become jubilant over the macrocosm and the microcosm, we will continue to objectify and exploit the world in which we live. According to the various authors, each spiritual tradition, whether Judaism (Rabbi Everett Gendler), Christianity (Catholic [Albert J. Fritsch, S.J.], Ecumenical [Jay McDaniel], or Evangelical

[Calvin DeWitt]), Zen Buddhism (Stephanie Kaza), Native Americanism (Twobears), Ecofeminism (Catherine Keller), Green Psychology (Albert J. Lachance), or Geologism (Thomas Berry), encourages the necessary awe and wonder to make its practitioners environmentally responsible. Each author calls for that recognition for all to live with self-restraint, respect for all life, and the development of a personal and community regard for place.

This book is a good supplement to the religious, philosophical, or environmental bookshelf. Few, if any, who appreciate the natural world could read this work and walk away uninspired to live a healthier, more holistic life – one more in tune to the cosmos. From a scholarly perspective, this book provides a good supplement to the previously mentioned works illustrating the diversity of thought among those who strive to find a way to integrate religious world-views with pro-environmental concerns.

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Where Land is Mostly Sky

Richard Fleck, Pueblo, Colorado: Passeggiata Press, 1997.

REVIEWED BY HARLAN HAGUE
STOCKTON, CALIFORNIA

Most writers who have labored long on scholarly works eventually pause to ponder what he or she has learned in the quest. These essays are Richard Fleck's reflections on his encounter with the western land.

The book is based largely on the author's hiking and climbing excursions in the American West. In the first essay he discusses his trip to Death Valley and concludes that the desiccated landscapes contain "the very planetary essence of the Great American West." It is indicative that this essay is a preface since the writings in the body of the book describe his experiences in the mountains, "where land is mostly sky."

The author and friends climb to the icy heights of Colorado's Long's Peak and into the contrary Uinta range which runs east and west. Fleck concluded that the respite on the snowy summit of Tokewanna Peak in the Uintas was "pure mountaineity." His excursions take him to Jicarita Peak in New Mexico's Pecos Wilderness and San Francisco Peaks in northern Arizona. He hiked in Grand Gulch near Blanding, Utah, where he and his companions communed with Anasazi spirits in their cliffside villages. He tells of the serenity and solitude of the Great Sand Dunes National Monument, Colorado, and his travels-in-spirit with John Muir in Alaska.

The two best essays are set in Wyoming which Fleck knows best. In one, he writes of his university literature class reading the poetry of N. Scott Momaday's *Way to Rainy Mountain* in an abandoned tipi ring on the Wyoming prairie, where land is mostly sky. In the other, he describes with some passion his mystical visits with the Shoshone elder Rupert Weeks on the reservation, his patria.

Appended is a useful short reading list of natural history writings on the western lands.

The book is generally well crafted, with a few exceptions. Occasional misspellings and lapses in proofreading are distracting. Fleck's suggestion that "soldiers and professional hunters" killed the buffalo "in order to starve the Indian" is a bit simplistic.

The book is nicely illustrated by the noted photographer, William Stephen Sutton. An Assistant Professor of Art at Denver's Regis University, Sutton is presently involved in a project to document public lands in the West.

Born and raised in the East, Fleck moved west for his higher education and never left. After twenty-five years as Professor of English at the University of Wyoming, he moved to Denver where he is now Dean of Arts & Humanities at the Community College of Denver. He has written a number of essays and introductions for books on nature and naturalists. He is the author of *Henry Thoreau and John Muir Among the Indians*, a novel and four collections of poems, and edited *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction.*

Where Land is Mostly Sky is a rewarding read for those who enjoy the western land, in person or vicariously, and are concerned about its preservation.

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Walking with John Muir Across Yosemite

Thomas R. and Geraldine R. Vale, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

REVIEWED BY DON WEISS
APTOS, CALIFORNIA

Authors who use Muir's works as the reference point for their mountain explorations and their writings start off with a huge challenge. Muir the man is now generally seen as larger than life and his writings set such a high standard that the closer you hew to his model of adventuresome wandering and reflective, inspirational, diary-like writing, the more likely you are to suffer in comparison. This is the fate of Vale and Vale's *Walking With Muir Across Yosemite.* Compared with Muir's works, it seems lacking.

The first lack is reflected in the title of the book. The Vales did not *walk* across Yosemite. They *drove* to the park many times and then took walks. Thus it is unsurprising that the vivid emotionalism of Muir's travels is absent from their book. This is emphasized in their final chapter, "Reflections and Implications." They are so distanced from Muir's emotional reactions to being in the mountains that they call, almost explicitly, for the enforcement of a reverent attitude by anyone who would dare to enter the Valley. Indeed, they call for the elimination of recreational activities simply on the basis that they, "are not Muir-like in their appeal."[1] What are we then to make of Muir's well-documented love of giant fires, including his act of torching a dead pine at Glacier Point for the amusement of Teddy Roosevelt? Should we re-instate the fire-fall simply because it *is* rather "Muir-like" in its appeal?

The second lack in *Walking With Muir Across Yosemite* is how the authors' imitation of an aspect of Muir's literary style falls completely flat when (apparently) not informed by Muir's emotional response to nature. When Muir describes a place and positive, sometimes ecstatic, connotations. In describing Crane Flat in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, the book that provides the ground for the Vales' counterpoint in their work, he paints a picture of, "The noble forest wall . . . which is made up of two silver firs and the yellow and sugar pines, which here seem to reach their highest pitch of beauty and grandeur. . ."[2] How drab, in comparison, this passage which also describes some of the Crane Flat biota, "Birds are usually what we seek, but the shrubs, the manzanita, create a more dependable display. By summer, the small, pendulant, white, urn-shaped flowers are spent, replaced by the neat clusters of green fruits that are reminiscent of bunches of tiny green delicious or gravenstein apples; 'manzanita' means 'little apple' in Spanish. Even more consistently present than the fruits are the buds for next spring's new growth, short arcs of overlapping scales, which hang from the ends of the branches."[3] The words used are descriptive rather than evocative.

The dry prose of scholarship would be perfectly excusable if it were part of an analysis of Muir's experience leading to some significant conclusions. Yet this, too, is lacking. When we get to the conclusion of what should be the climactic chapter, all we learn is that the Vales agree that familiarity with Yosemite breeds a feeling of brotherhood with nature and a sense of responsibility for the proper maintenance of the park; proper, in terms, meaning "temple-like."

It's difficult to see why two such respected scholars as the Vales have written and the University of Wisconsin Press has published a book that succeeds neither as an evocation of Muir's First Summer nor as an analysis of it. Certainly some reference to the diaries on which Muir's published work was based would have been a good, even essential, starting point if the book were to be valuable as serious scholarship. Yet for inspiration, for passionate descriptions that would prompt the readers to follow Muir's path across Yosemite, I can only recommend Muir's own book, not the Vales' pale echo.

Notes

1. Thomas R. Vale and Geraldine R. Vale, *Walking With John Muir Across Yosemite*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, page 134.

2. John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Houghton Mifflin, 1911, 1994, page 93.

3. Vale and Vale, page 50.

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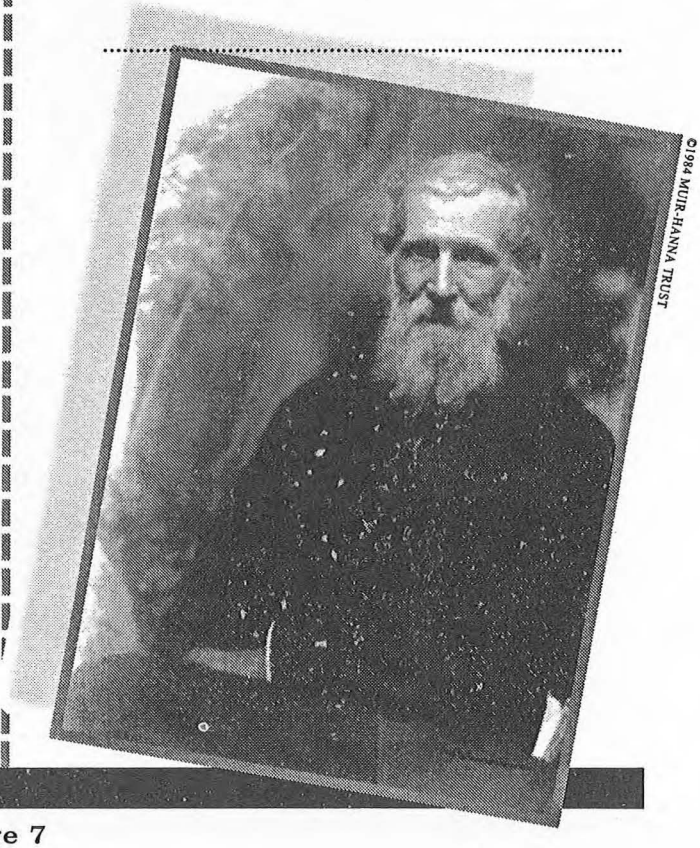

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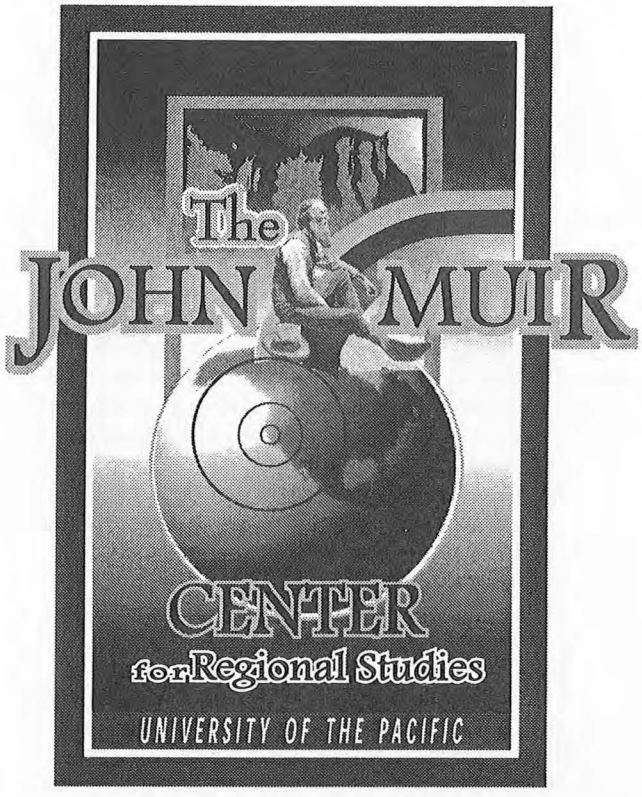

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